

## **The State of American Network Television**

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Scholars and the news media are always arguing that the traditional TV network is dead. Since the advent of cable, then DVRs, followed by the discontinuation of the analog signal, and now the prevalence of TV available online, the old broadcast network model is simply outdated. And maybe these claims are accurate—in fact, they probably are, or at any rate, they offer useful predictions. Certainly all of these factors, combined with the (always fickle) audience, have caused the broadcast network as developed in the early days of radio and then television to grow into something new.

Nonetheless, for every time I see a headline pointing out the irrelevance of networks or talk to a scholar predicting the networks' demise, I seem to encounter evidence from the conglomerates and networks themselves indicating their belief in the importance and value of the network. For one, there's that bizarre annual ritual of the network upfronts—the occasion during which all the networks preview their upcoming fall slate and sell advertising time for the season. Although there has long been talk of the end of this process, it endures still, demonstrating two crucial factors related to the state of the networks: the industry's belief in the centrality of the network and the reluctance to abandon its practices (however strange, ineffective and outdated). Related to the issue of network advertising is NBC-Universal's relatively recent push to sell their advertisers "integrated sales marketing" (ISM) packages, providing advertisers with time across the conglomerate's television holdings, with the prime real estate in their network prime time lineups. This practice—one which NBC-U seems to lay claim to, but which also appears at other conglomerates—again reveals the belief of both the conglomerate and advertisers that network prime time reigns supreme in terms of the value of its overall viewership. And while prime time may still be king in the world of network TV, the fact that conglomerates continue to pump money, talent and promotional efforts into their morning and late night shows as well as the nightly news also exhibits the fundamental belief in the role of the network as flagship. Declining viewership as audiences move to cable or away from television for the same content has not seemed to diminish the perception of prestige and centrality contained within these programs, perhaps because of their long history of service to their home networks.

Although these examples show the ways that conglomerates continue to demonstrate their belief in the power of the network, there are many gaps in the institutional logic which governs them. So the question remains: why the disconnect? If scholars and newsmongers can so clearly see the reasons the old network model no longer works, why do conglomerates seem determined to hold on to it? There are three reasons I can identify, and the first is the behavior of audiences. Although most savvy television scholars would like to say differentiation between networks means nothing to audiences, I find that to be simply untrue. Perhaps many younger viewers no longer see clear delineations between ABC, WGN and Comedy Central (though I'm not certain that's accurate, either), but viewers who grew up in the eras of network dominance (and I'm speaking here not only of the classic network era, but also through the multichannel transition) can likely still articulate the identity associated with each network, as well as his/her preference. This leads me to my second explanation for the disconnect: audiences still have associations with and preferences for particular networks, conglomerates view them as flagships. This is where most conglomerates air their prestige programming, where they invest their money most heavily, and where they focus their promotional efforts. For better or worse, networks are still seen as the gateway to television programming. In part, I would argue, all of this comes

down to my last—and most encompassing—reason for the persistence of networks: institutional stubbornness. There's no question that the entertainment industries do not like change, preferring instead to cling to old practices and behaviors until it becomes absolutely impossible for them to do so. I think this desire is more or understandable. After all, NBC, CBS & ABC have spent decades building up their image and audience. Abandoning that now must seem to those working within structures built in the 1920s to be the worst kind of folly.

We may be in the post-network era, but networks persist, and the industries surrounding them remain committed to the model. Only time will tell what may cause that model to finally crumble—and when. In the meantime, we may just have to continue our grumbling disbelief in the persistence of networks, even as those who own them continue to keep their head in the sand.